

# The business of bingo



The Casino Bingo Hall at the Milk Pail complex near East Dundee, with seating for 650, offers a high-tech, big money venue for charitable bingo.

Daily Herald Photo/George LeClaire

## Casino Bingo Hall takes charity game to new level

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2-26-98

It could be the easiest way for a charitable organization to make a quick buck, or perhaps 100,000 of them.

Any lingering stereotype of bingo as a simple amusement to pass the time at nursing homes is wiped out by the new Casino Bingo Hall, a high-tech, big-money game center devoted entirely to charitable bingo play.

Now open at the Milk Pail Complex on Route 25 near East Dundee, the Casino Bingo Hall is a prototype for what the owner expects will become a chain of

professional bingo centers throughout the suburbs. That is, assuming the concept is successful, which owner Al Fisher, of Fisher Industries International in Downers Grove, says he doesn't doubt for a second.

Fisher's confidence is no surprise, considering \$6 billion is wagered on bingo every year in the United States and Canada, according to publishers of Bingo Bugle, a monthly magazine for 2.5 million bingo players in North America.

Fisher started out six years ago supplying bingo equipment to churches and service groups throughout the Midwest.

But when it came to running the game, Fisher said, "I always felt that no one did a first class job."

The Casino Bingo Hall seats up to 650 — considerably more than the average church basement.

But more than the size, designated smoking section and snack bar, the Casino Bingo Hall gives a once simple game a slick, sophisticated feel. The game is totally computerized, down to serial numbers on every bingo card to confirm a win.

It's a bingo player's dream come true,

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## BINGO: Hall expects to open during week

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but some charitable groups have more reservations than might be expected for a fund-raiser Fisher bills as a sure win. He expects participants to clear more than \$100,000 a year, even after the \$600-per-night rental fee for the hall.

"I was skeptical," said Dianna Eitel, district commissioner of the Fox River Valley Pony Club in Barrington, which ran bingo the past two Saturday afternoons. "It's a lot of money — you don't believe it at first."

The pony club's previous fund-raisers have been limited to horsemanship shows. Most years, the club gets by raising \$8,000. But bingo sounded attractive this year, Eitel said, because the club is looking for fast money — at least \$100,000 — to build a new riding course.

More than 400 people showed up for the Pony Club's first bingo session. But by the second week, Eitel said attendance dropped so much that the club actually might have lost money.

The problem, Fisher said, is that the bingo hall is not open on weekdays because bingo licenses for the groups signed up have not cleared through the Illinois Department of Revenue yet. People are confused about the hours and unsure if the hall is really open. Fisher said he expects to be running on a seven-day-a-week schedule within two weeks.

The Fox River Valley Pony Club, which ran bingo on a limited license, has not decided if it will sign up for a full year. Others, such as the Hampshire Veterans' Association, which



**High-tech features are drawing customers.**

has run its own bingo night in the past, couldn't be more thrilled with the Casino Bingo Hall's professional approach. Fisher's company provided Hampshire Veterans' operations Manager Sharon Suddeth with a business plan and talked strategy about how she could raise as much as possible.

"Bingo is basically like a business," said Suddeth, who is hoping bingo will help pay off some of the club's debt from remodeling its building. "And if we're going to do something like this, I want to have a real business plan in place."



Linda Branham of East Dundee wins a \$150 bingo at the new Casino Bingo Hall. Prizes reach \$500 for an individual game and \$8,000 for raffles.

Daily Herald Photos/George LeClaire